

## [Review] Gavin Schaffer (2014) The vision of a nation: making multiculturalism on British television, 1960-80

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***The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television, 1960 – 80*** by  
Gavin Schaffer, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 312 pages. ISBN: 978-0-23-029298-7,  
Paperback, £16.99.

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Television, as historians are increasingly recognising, was a central medium of everyday life in the 1960s and 1970s. Not only were family and community life re-organised around the television schedule, but television offered a vision of the everyday, and an imagination of community, back to its audiences. At a time when Britain's ethnic diversity was increasing apace, as Gavin Schaffer shows us in *The Vision of a Nation*, government ministers, television executives, programmers and writers continually debated the kind of everyday to be represented, and the parameters of community to be included, as they approached television as a site for representing and attempting to recreate Britain as a multicultural society. The range of this book is impressive. Schaffer explores government initiatives for ethnic minority programming, the treatment of race politics in news and current affairs, marginal voices in public-access broadcasting, writing and casting black and Asian Britain in television drama, and race as entertainment in the race comedies of the sixties and seventies. The picture that emerges is of contestation: the responsibility of television for creating social harmony, and the strategies for doing so, were interpreted differently by different people, and sometimes in ways which seem, with hindsight, frankly absurd. What is certain, though, is that the importance of television in the making or unmaking of multicultural Britain was recognised by all. In an era of social discord in which the stakes for Britain's future were often thought to be routed through the politics of race, it was this recognition that caused such contestation.

Much of Schaffer's book considers the debates about what could and couldn't, and should and shouldn't, be said about race on television. By the late 1960s – and the impact of Powellism was surely decisive here – broadcasters were shifting toward more daring inclusions of extremist race politics in their schedules. In part, this came down to shifting understandings of the remit of race relations legislation in relation to programming. Indeed, as it became understood that broadcasters were unlikely to be successfully prosecuted under the Race Relations Act, many grew bolder in testing the waters. However, Schaffer also allows us to understand this shift as a trajectory away from an early era of antiracist liberalism which refused platforms to such politics. As this early liberal antiracism lost ground, it was increasingly common for broadcasters to allow the voices of both 'immigrants' and their detractors to be given free expression in the name of openness and 'balance'. It was through such decisions that by 1976, as Schaffer shows us in one eye-opening example, one could tune into the BBC's late-night 'Open Door' programme to find a Conservative councillor with links to the National Front given a platform to call for the revocation of the Race Relations Act and the repatriation of immigrants.

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Ironically, however, even with such platforms available, the assumption by many was that the public sphere in the age of race relations acts was marked by censorship and exclusion, in which the views of 'ordinary people' were systematically refused. It was this assumption of public censorship around issues of race that underpinned the race comedies of the 1970s. Schaffer's discussion of these comedies is a highlight of this book, and he deftly demonstrates how these programmes played constantly with the limits of what it was acceptable to say about race. Schaffer's discussion of these programmes reveals that, even when far of the mark in their interpretations of the actual force or remit of the Race Relations Act, these comedies, and people's reactions to them, were often motivated by the idea that the right of people to express their opinion on immigration was being denied.

As the above indicates, race relations legislation and policy loom large in this story. The government's dealings with television companies were informed by the dual strategy to combine immigration restrictions with race relations management. Schaffer is largely, and rightly, concerned with how this race relations policy was viewed by television professionals and television viewers. However, he also shows us how government intervened in television programming. In the 1960s, Maurice Foley, a minister in the Department for Economic Affairs, took a central role in lobbying for 'immigrant' programming. Foley's lobbying was persistent and effective, and much of the programming for South Asian communities which was produced in this era was a credit to his determination, and reflected his understanding of what multicultural integration meant. Considering the role of the government is important for understanding not only how far the making of multiculturalism on television was planned by the state, but also what the relations between television content and state policies were in an era in which the government was increasingly seen as playing a censoring role on issues of race relations. As Schaffer shows, through figures like Foley the government did manage to directly influence the programming schedule on race relations, even if this influence was a marginal part of the overall programming schedule.

Reading *The Vision of a Nation*, one is often reminded how different were dominant ideas about race and multiculturalism in this era. For all their professed aim of improving social relations, for example, the government-backed programmes of the type advocated by Maurice Foley often betrayed what Schaffer terms 'strong assimilationist tendencies', which were as likely as much of the race rhetoric of anti-immigration politics to highlight 'immigrant' lives as problematic. *The Vision of a Nation* is not without its moments of hope – the dogged persistence of *This Week's* Desmond Wilcox to challenge anti-immigration politics is a particular highlight – and it would be wrong to write off men like Foley too readily. However, if one were reading this book in a pessimistic mood there is much to provoke the conclusion that, even in its liberal guises, race relations programming often held too much in common with what it apparently stood against. Emphasising the need to tutor new immigrants on the structures of the social services, housing, child-minding, the role of job centres, or the correct use of bins, the Foley-inspired programming for immigrants constructed the 'problem' of integration around the supposed unpreparedness of these communities to be responsible citizens of a modern welfare state. In this, it seems, there was some continuity between the liberal race relations agenda of sections of the government and the broadcasting authorities, and the logic of the race comedies of the 1970s, or the more hostile responses to black and Asian communities explored elsewhere in this book. When Schaffer cites a white man in Brent claiming on the aforementioned *Open Door* show of 1976 that 'immigrants' in his council flat 'wet the lifts, they're taken short, they drop their trousers and do their business and that's it', the assumed unsuitability of 'immigrant'

populations to modern life held more than a passing resemblance to the milder assumptions underpinning some of the 'immigrant' programming of an earlier era.

*Vision of a Nation* is a welcome addition to the growing literature on race politics and multiculturalism in postwar Britain. Certainly, this move to consider television's place in this history is long overdue. There is much to suggest that, of all the television genres discussed by Schaffer, it was the race comedies that most defined this era, and that contributed most to redefining everyday life. The viewing figures alone suggest their importance: at their height, *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour* could draw in audiences in the tens of millions. Despite its controversial content, the BBC was reluctant to sanction *Till Death* precisely because of its popular appeal. And yet, at the same time, it was perhaps here more than anywhere that the vast plethora of racial epithets that saturated British society in this era were sustained, and that new regimes of racial knowledge were produced. In memoirs of this period by black and Asian writers, it is common to hear of the impact of these programmes on senses of self and belonging, and as a mediating presence in their relations with others. While Schaffer only touches occasionally on the responses of viewers – white and black – to the television shows discussed in this book, it is here that researchers might turn next.